DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 392 067 CS 215 241

AUTHOR Davis, Wesley K.
TITLE Educational Implications of a Study on Grammar and Basic Writing Skills in a Developmental English Course.
PUB DATE [96]
NOTE 15p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Analysis of Variance; *Basic Writing; Developmental Studies Programs; *English Instruction; *Grammar; Higher Education; *Writing Improvement; Writing Processes; Writing Research; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Basic Writers; *Writing Development

ABSTRACT

A study examined the growth in basic writing and grammar skills of 14 developmental English students. The study determined whether a traditional rule-based, form-centered mode of instruction, combined with a limited writing-process approach, had any significant impact on overall writing quality and grammar skills. It used a quantitative, pretest/posttest quasi-experimental design to find answers for this inquiry. Results indicated a trend in growth for basic writing and grammar skills across the three main dependent variables or outcomes in the study. In overall writing quality on the students' essays and in grammar skills measured on the College Placement Exam (CPE), the students' growth was statistically significant. On other comprehensive tests in grammar and writing mechanics from the course workbook, the students did show growth in their skills, although this growth was not statistically significant. Statistical analysis on the variables of the study were computed by using Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). F statistic tests were done to determine whether there were significant differences between pretest and posttest scores on the essays, the College Placement Exams, and the exams on grammar and writing mechanics. Findings suggest that these students benefited from the traditional form-centered, rule-based pedagogy, along with limited composing-process approach, to learn procedural knowledge in grammar and basic writing skills for standard English. (Contains 16 references.) (CR)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

ED 392 067

# Educational Implications of a Study on Grammar and Basic Writing Skills in a Developmental English Course

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
W. Davis
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Wesley K. Davis, Ph.D.
Division of Humanities
Dalton College
213 N. College Drive
Dalton, Georgia 30720

CS215341



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Abstract

This paper reports the results and the educational implications of a study conducted in a developmental English course. This study evaluated the growth in basic writing and grammar skills of 14 developmental English students to determine whether a traditional rule-based, form-centered mode of instruction, combined with a limited writing-process approach, had any significant impact on overall writing quality and grammar skills. The study used a quantitative, pretest/posttest quasi-experimental design to find answers for this inquiry.

There was a trend in growth for basic writing and grammar skills across the three main dependent variables or outcomes in the study. In overall writing quality on the students' essays and in grammar skills measured on the College Placement Exam (CPE), the students' growth was statistically significant. On other comprehensive tests in grammar and writing mechanics from the course workbook, the students did show growth in their skills, although this growth was not statistically significant. These findings suggest that these students benefitted from the traditional form-centered, rule-based pedagogy, along with the limited composing-process approach, to learn procedural knowledge in grammar and basic writing skills for standard English.

The Problem

In basic writing for developmental English, faculty preference toward one teaching model or another has set instructor against instructor in the philosophy of teaching, often splitting English departments into those who teach "product-centered writing by empahsizing rules of grammatical correctness and essay "form," and those who teach process-based writing by emphasizing the students' personal discovery of meaning throughout the composing process. The form-centered, rule-based faction of an English department teaches students to structure written products following grammatical and mechanical conventions of standard English (the function of language resulting from its form), while the process-based faction teaches students to use language as a way of creating meaning for themselves and their readers (Arrington, 1986), thus language function preceding its form. Each opposing model of composition identifies with particular teaching methods of how a writer composes and learns to write most effectively, as well as what a writer needs to know about composing.

This study evaluates the growth and outcomes in overall writing quality and grammar skills (dependent variables) of 14 developmental English students taught by the traditional form-centered, rule-based mode (independent variable). The study uses a quantitative (statistical), pretest/posttest quasi-experimental design to assess the independent and dependent variables in the students' essays, grammar tests, and College Placement Exams (CPE).

Review of Related Literature

The traditional form-centered, rule-based paradigm is sometimes labeled "current-traditional rhetoric" (Berlin, 1982; Emig, 1982; Freedman & Pringle, 1980; Young, 1978) or the "presentational" mode (Hillocks, 1984, 1986). This teaching method, Laine and Schultz (1985) explain, is oriented towards writing mechanics and grammar; it assumes that sudents are taught good writing through instruction on the modes of dicourse, methods of development in exposition, the study of model essays, outlines, word choice, topic sentences, and rules of grammar. Teachers operating under this orientation expect a five paragraph theme to be completed swiftly (60 minutes), on an unannounced topic, and in a predetermined manner. In preparing this formula essay, students are told to include an introduction, a body and a conclusion. Laine and Schultz claim that this traditional rhetoric ignores the composing process, treats rhetorical invention as an algorithm (find a thesis and make an outline), and seldom encourages true writing done in an authentic voice, to a specific audience (e.g., peers), and for a specific purpose (e.g., to explain or persuade).

According to Laine and Schultz (1985), teachers then mark themes by correcting errors, regardless of whether those errors hide ideas. When editorial groups are used, their task is to respond to the same errors for the sake of correctness. This type of response, whether given by the teacher or the students, emphasizes spelling, grammar, punctuation, and essay form; under this current-traditional orientation, the teacher's primary goal is obtaining efficiency in correct writing while adhering to a linear,

machine-like model (Laine & Schultz, 1985). Graff (1979) claims that rather than encouraging clear, vivid and honest writing, teachers emphasize mistake-free, in-class writing through drills on grammar and usage. Proponents of process-based teaching also view correct composing in the traditional approach as a negative, prescriptive response to writing instead of positive, constructive feedback. The present study examined the effects of this traditional approach to teaching grammar and writing on the students' essays and grammar exams.

Design and Procedures

This study is a quantitative, statistical analysis of the effects of traditional form-centered, rule-based grammar and writing instruction on basic writing in developmental English. The purpose of this study is to discover differences in the writing growth of 14 developmental English students between their pretests and posttests on the following outcomes (dependent variables): overall holistic writing quality; skills in grammar and writing mechanics, particularly on the College Placement Exam (CPE). The dependent variables show whether or not the independent variable (teaching approach) effects significant growth in developmental English students' writing quality and grammar skills. The design and methodology for obtaining and analyzing the data place specific limitations on the variables, the research instruments, the population of subjects, and the procedure used in the study.

The instructional procedure was characterized in the following way: (1) correctness in students' writing by teaching rules of

grammar and mechanics; (2) instruction in standard written English by using a workbook; (3) skills-oriented, teacher-centered classroom with the professor in control of such activities as grammar drill; (4) the use of writing models; (5) instruction in the modes of discourse (narration, description, and exposition) and the methods of development and organization; (6) students' engagement in the writing process (planning, outlining, composing, revising, and editing/correcting six (6) five-paragraph essays).

The data collected give an accurate picture of the independent variable's (instructional mode) nature and effects on the dependents variables (growth and outcomes in the students' writing quality and grammar skills). The data were located among the population of developmental English students enrolled at Dalton College in Northwest Georgia.

Data were collected from writing samples taken before and after instruction (Sanders & Little, 1975), because most theorists believe a direct sample is the best way to measure writing ability (Cooper, 1975, 1977; Diederich, 1974). Fourteen developmental English students were selected from a class of traditional form-centered, rule-based teaching of grammar and basic writing; their writing samples were then analyzed. One pretest writing sample was taken from each student at the beginning of the course before instruction began, and one posttest essay was taken from each student at the end of the course after instruction. As guides to educational research point out, the pretest-posttest design is one effective way to determine the effects of an educational treatment

(Bloom, Hastings, & Madaus, 1971; Campbell & Stanley, 1963; Cronbach, 1963).

The writing sessions were run identically for both the pretest and the posttest. At the beginning of the course the students could choose one of three topics to write on. The students then had 60 minutes to plan, compose, revise, edit and correct their essays. At the end of that time the essays were collected. The same procedure was followed for the posttest essay at the end of the course instruction, except that the students could choose from three different topics to write on.

Data were also collected from the students' College Placement Exam (CPE) scores before instruction and CPE scores after instruction, especially from those eligible students who first passed the posttest essay. In addition, data were collected from the students' grammar pretest and posttest scores.

The following research instruments were used for the data analyses of the dependent variables (outcomes) in the present study. Grammar pretests and posttests and the College Placement Exams (CPE) covered various matters in grammar and writing mechanics set up in sentences forming paragraphs on the tests. Students chose from four possible answers on each of 50 statements on each test. The tests were then scored by machine.

In evaluating writing quality, a general impression holistic rating session using expert readers--generally experienced English teachers who are trained to agree on certain global characteristics of the piece of writing--can produce acceptable reliabilities (Cooper, 1975, 1977; Diederich, 1974). For this study the raters

were two college faculty members with Ph.D.'s in English. In addition to having several years of experience in teaching college composition, both raters also had expertise and high agreement on holistic scoring for the Board of Regents' Essay Exam in the University System of Georgia. Both raters volunteered to participate in the rating sessions, so there was a strong sense of willingness and cooperation right from the onset.

The faculty raters read and scored the pretest and posttest essays based on a scale ranging from one (lowest failing score) to four (highest passing score). The raters followed this grading scale and criteria used to score Regents' Testing Program essays in the University System of Georgia. In all cases where the two raters disagreed by more than one point, a third rater scored the paper, and the two closest scores were used.

Statistical analysis on the variables of the study were computed by using Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). F statistics tests were done to determine whether there were significant diferences between pretest and posttest scores on the essays, the College Placement Exams, and the exams on grammar and writing mechanics. The levels of significance for the F statistics were based on the following "p" values (significance of F): (1) * $p < .05$, significant; (2) ** $p < .01$, highly significant; *** $p < .001$, very highly significant.

Results

In overall writing quality, each student wrote two essays on different topics, one essay before instruction and one essay following instruction. Each essay was scored holistically by two raters on a scale of one (1--poor/failing) to four (4--superior/passing). This procedure resulted in two scores on each pretest writing sample and two scores on each posttest writing sample for each student in the study. For statistical analysis, the two pretest scores on each student's essay were combined, and the two posttest scores were combined, resulting in a possible low score of two (2) and a possible high score of eight (8) on each writing occasion. The students' mean score on the pretest essay was 2.07, and their mean score on the posttest essay was 3.93, a change of +1.86. The statistical analysis indicated that the difference between the pretest and posttest scores was very highly significant ($F = 52.94$; $df = 1, 26$; $p = .0001$; *** $p < .001$) in the main effect for the method of teaching basic writing in developmental English.

The College Placement Exam (CPE) measures students' basic skills in grammar and writing mechanics. The passing score on this exam is a 75 or better. The students of this study took the CPE before instruction in the course, and then they took another CPE after completing the course and passing the final, exit essay exam. The students' mean score on the CPE pretest was 70.4, and their mean score on the CPE posttest was 76.3, a change of +5.9. Statistical analysis indicated that the difference between these pretest and posttest scores was highly significant ($F = 11.5673$; df

= 1, 20; p = .002834; ** p < .01) in the main effect for the method of teaching grammar and basic writing skills.

The comprehensive exams from the course workbook also measure the students' skills in grammar and writing mechanics. The students took a pretest prior to instruction, and then they took a posttest after instruction. The students' mean score on the pretest was 47.6%, and their mean score on the posttest was 53.2%, a change of +5.6%. However, statistical analysis indicated that the difference between these pretest and posttest scores was not significant (F = 1.48; df = 1, 28; p = .23393; p > .05) in the main effect for teaching grammar and writing skills.

## Conclusions and Implications

Based on the results of this study, the following discussion presents the conclusions and implications for research and teaching basic writing and grammar skills in developmental English. One of the most important questions this study sought to answer was whether a traditional form-centered, rule-based teaching approach made any significant difference in the students' growth of writing and grammar skills. Based on the evidence from the sample in this study, the answer is yes.

First, the students demonstrated statistically significant growth in overall writing quality between the pretest essay and the posttest essay. This growth suggests that these students greatly benefitted even from limited planning, outlining, composing, revising, and editing/correcting each of the six essay assignments in the course after discussing some standard models of the five-

paragraph essay in narration, description, and exposition. These findings further suggest that the students developed an organizational schema or outlined plan to write such an essay successfully in 60 minutes. The students frequent engagement in the writing process for these essay assignments provided them with the essential practice to write a passing essay for an audience of at least two English faculty members reading and scoring each posttest essay.

The scores of the College Placement Exam (CPE) indicated that the students experienced statistically significant growth in grammar skills and writing mechanics between the pretest and the posttest. This growth suggests that these students benefitted from engaging in the grammar exercises, drills, and tests from the course workbook, thus developing procedural knowledge in the rules of grammar and writing mechanics to apply to their essays and the CPE. This frequent practice and testing prepared the students to pass the exit essay exam and then to pass the CPE so that they could enroll in College Freshman Composition.

On the comprehensive grammar tests from the course workbook, the students did experience growth in grammar skills, although this growth was not statistically significant. However, the results suggest that the students still benefitted from the drills on the grammar exercises and the tests in the course workbook, thus increasing their procedural knowledge in the rules of grammar and writing mechanics to apply to their essays.

In conclusion, the findings from this study would seem to give evidence that combining techniques from traditional form-centered,

rule-based instruction in grammar and writing mechanics along with frequent practice in the stages of the composing process can be of substantial benefit to students learning standard written English in the composition classroom. This study also suggests numerous variables or areas in writing and grammar for further research, areas that will only help writing teachers and educational administrators understand even better the way in which the traditional and new movements of teaching writing can still find common ground to best serve the teacher and the student in the writing classroom.

References

Arrington, P. (1986). The traditions of the writing process. Freshman English News, 14(3), 2-10.

Berlin, J. A. (1982). Contemporary composition: The major pedagogical theories. College English, 44, 765-777.

Bloom, B. S., Hastings, J. L., & Madaus, C. F. (1971). Handbook on formative and summative evaluation of student learning. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Campbell, D. T., & Stanley, J. C. (1963). Experimental and quasi-experimental designs for research. Chicago: Rand McNally.

Cronback, L. J. (1963). Evaluation for course improvement. Texas College Record, 64, 672-683.

Cooper, C. R. (1975). Research roundup--Measuring growth in writing. English Journal, 64(7), 111-120.

Cooper, C. R. (1977). Holistic evaluation of writing. In C. R. Cooper & L. Odell (Eds.), Evaluating Writing (pp.3-32). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Diederich, P. B. (1974). Measuring growth in English. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Emig, J. (1982). Writing, composition, and rhetoric. In H. E. Mitzel (Ed.), The encyclopedia of educational research (pp. 2021-2036). New York: The Free Press.

Freedman, A., & Pringle, I. (1980). Writing in the college years: Some indices of growth. College Composition and Communication, 31, 311-324.

Graff, G. (1979). Literature against itself: Literacy ideas in modern society. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hillocks, G., Jr. (1984). What works in teaching composition: A meta-analysis of experimental treatment studies. American Journal of Education, 93, 133-170.

Hillocks, G., Jr. (1986). Research on written composition: New directions for teaching. Urbana, IL: National Conference on Research in English.

Laine, C., & Schultz, L. (1985). Composition theory and practice: The paradigm shift. Volta Review, 87(5), 9-20.

Sanders, S. E., & Littlefield, J. H. (1975). Perhaps test essays can reflect significant improvement in freshmen composition: Report on a successful attempt. Research in the Teaching of English, 9, 145-153.

Young, R. E. (1978). Paradigms and problems: Needed research in rhetorical invention. In C. R. Cooper & L. Odell (Eds.), Research on composing: Points of departure (pp. 29-47). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.